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Paul Ciccarelli, special agent in charge, and Special Agent Deborah Rocco work with an evidence kit at the Naval Criminal Investigative Service office at Pearl Harbor.

Reality television

**An isle Navy investigator
serves as a consultant to the
new CBS drama "Navy NCIS"**

By Gregg K. Kakesako
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Navy Special Agent Deborah Rocco had more than a passing interest when CBS last week premiered one of its new shows for the fall.

Veteran producer Donald Bellisario, well known in the islands for his popular "Magnum, P.I." television series, was building his latest effort around the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS), with which Rocco, 37, has served for the past 16 years.

She also was called by her bosses in Washington, D.C., this summer to help actress Sasha Alexander with her role as Caitlin Todd, a former Secret Service agent who decides to join the naval investigative staff.

Rocco said she was asked to fly to Hollywood in July to work with Alexander after Bellisario and his team of writers saw a June MidWeek cover story that featured her career as an NCIS special agent.

The MidWeek article noted that Rocco, who is serving her second tour in Hawaii, has been honored with two of the three biggest law enforcement awards from the Hawaii Joint Police Association. In 2001, Rocco was named as its Top Cop, and then in May she received a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Rocco said she first met with Bellisario in June in his Sunset Boulevard office and reviewed the script of the first show. They talked about her background "and what it was like being an NCIS agent," Rocco said.



COURTESY OF
DEBORAH ROCCO

Rocco, left, spent two days
with actress Sasha
Alexander helping her
prepare for a role as an
NCIS special agent on the
CBS show "Navy NCIS,"
practicing with her on a Los
Angeles firing range.

"I spent two days with Sasha Alexander a month later," Rocco added. "She was concerned about the proper way to handle a weapon since she had never fired one before. She also wanted my perspective on what it was like to be a woman and an agent."

When the two went to the firing range, Rocco -- who admits she has had to point her Sig Sauer 9 mm handgun at people, but has never had to fire it -- said Alexander "shot very well."

"We also went through several tactical situations," Rocco added, "shooting from behind a vehicle and taking cover."

Rocco said the series actors and writers seemed genuinely interested in how agents respond to stressful situations and how they interrogate suspects. Besides Alexander, the star of the show, Mark Harmon, also has spent time with NCIS agents.

Rocco said Alexander also was "interested in the type of cases I have worked on."

Since graduating from Florida State University in 1987, Rocco has handled everything from major murder cases -- including last summer's brutal slaying by a Pearl Harbor sailor of his Singaporean wife and her mother -- to computer and corporate fraud crimes.

Rocco scored a first while stationed in Boston when she tracked down a man in Argentina who used Harvard University's computer system to hack into Navy computers.

Rocco, who oversees five agents at the Marine Corps Base Hawaii in Kaneohe, said the most heinous crimes she has handled involved those against children: "I would say those are the worst for me."

Rocco said she majored in criminology while attending Saebe Regina University in Newport, R.I. However, she didn't aim her sights on NCIS until after an special agent talked to one of her classes.

"He talked about his worldwide mission, and I knew that this was the job I wanted," Rocco said.

But because she lacked extensive law enforcement background or any other special skills, Rocco said she was pessimistic about making the cut.

At her last interview, Rocco said, she remembered being asked why NCIS should hire her. "I remember sitting at the edge of my chair and remember telling myself this is it ... I said I would be a loyal employee ... and that if you hire me, you'll never regret it."

Paul Ciccarelli, who now heads the 55-member Hawaii NCIS field office, sat on Rocco's screening panel. He was impressed and hasn't regretted his decision to rate her "highly suitable for the job."

Ciccarelli, a former Rhode Island police officer, said NCIS has about 1,000 special agents and another 1,000 analysts stationed around the world. Those in NCIS are not military personnel, but civilians.

NCIS grew out of the Office of Naval Intelligence in 1915. It was renamed the Naval Investigative Service in 1966.

In 1982, its name was changed again to Naval Security Command. It responded to the 1983 bombing of the Marine Barracks in Beirut with the opening of a 24-hour-a-day intelligence center. After several more name changes it became the Naval Criminal Investigative Service in 1992, and two years later was restructured as a federal law enforcement agency with 14 field offices.

As for last Tuesday's premiere of "Navy NCIS," Ciccarelli said, "I got a chuckle out of it, especially when two NCIS agents showed them their badges to try to talk their way past airport screeners. One of the screeners said: 'NCIS, I never heard of them.'

"That's pretty accurate. That's happened to me."

But the program is based on real NCIS cases, Ciccarelli added, pointing out that this Tuesday's program is built around a recent incident where a disgruntled Marine cut the parachute cords of his fellow jumpers in North Carolina.

"The producers and writers want to do it right," added Rocco, whose husband, Steve, is the assistant NCIS special agent in charge of counterintelligence and anti-terrorism in Hawaii. "But there is going to be some Hollywood thrown in.

"In the end I think it is very positive for this agency."

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